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Europe's Strategic Autonomy Will Be Won — Or Lost — In Development Policy – OpEd

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Europe's push for strategic autonomy is missing a critical piece—and Washington is helping create the gap.

During my time leading U.S. development programs overseas, I saw how quickly influence shifts when sustained engagement disappears. The debate has focused on defense, energy, and technology. But influence in today's world is not built on hard power alone. It is also shaped in ministries, municipalities, and markets across developing regions—where development policy quietly determines alliances, norms, and long-term stability.

That is where the next phase of global competition is already unfolding.

As Washington pulls back from international development, a strategic vacuum is emerging in regions where sustained engagement once shaped political and institutional outcomes. This is not simply a budgetary shift. It reflects a broader inward turn in U.S. policy, with global consequences. It also risks ceding long-term influence in regions critical to U.S. strategic competition.

That vacuum will not remain unfilled.

China has expanded its presence through [infrastructure, financing, and long-term economic engagement](#) across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Russia, with fewer resources but clear intent, has sought to [consolidate influence in strategically important regions, particularly in Africa](#).

These approaches offer alternatives—but not equivalents.

They are not designed to strengthen democratic institutions, promote transparency, or reinforce governance systems aligned with European values. Instead, they often prioritize state control, resource access, and geopolitical leverage.

This presents a direct challenge for Europe.

If the European Union is serious about strategic autonomy, it must look beyond traditional domains. Development policy is not an auxiliary tool. It is foreign policy—one that shapes environments where future partnerships, markets, and political alignments take root.

The countries that invest in development today are helping determine the geopolitical landscape of tomorrow.

Europe has significant advantages in this space, as the European Union and its member states are collectively the [world's largest provider of development assistance](#). It has financial resources, institutional experience, and a long-standing commitment to development cooperation. Initiatives such as [Global Gateway](#) signal an awareness of the need to offer an alternative to competing models.

But ambition without coherence will fall short.

European development efforts remain fragmented across institutions and member states, often lacking the strategic focus needed to compete effectively in a more contested global environment. What is required now is not just funding, but alignment—linking development policy more clearly to Europe's broader geopolitical objectives.

This is where certain member states can play a decisive role.

Countries with deep experience in development cooperation bring not only technical capacity but also something more difficult to build: trust.

Spain, for example, has developed long-term, relationship-based engagement through institutions such as the [Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation \(AECID\)](#). That credibility, built over decades, cannot be replicated quickly and represents a strategic asset for Europe as a whole.

I observed this firsthand during my work in Central America, where collaboration with European partners, including Spanish Cooperation, consistently demonstrated the value of sustained, locally grounded engagement.

Trust is not a soft outcome. It is a form of influence.

In a more competitive international environment, influence is no longer measured solely in military or economic terms. It is also built through partnerships, institutional support, and the ability to deliver results that are seen as legitimate by local actors.

This is precisely where Europe holds an advantage—if it chooses to use it.

Strategic autonomy will not be achieved solely through defense capabilities or technological independence. It will also depend on Europe's ability to project influence through development, particularly in regions where governance, stability, and economic opportunity remain fragile.

The current shift in U.S. engagement should not be viewed only as a withdrawal.

It is also an opportunity.

An opportunity for Europe to define a more coherent and assertive role in shaping the global order—not through coercion, but through partnership.

The question is no longer whether Europe can lead in international development.

The question is whether it will.

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